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THE RUSSIAN RETREAT—AS RUSSIANS SEE IT

BY CHARLES JOHNSTON

THE war has curiously disappointed our expectation as to the character of the nations—their real nature “under the aspect of eternity,” as the phrase is; sometimes very happily disappointing us. France has come out magnificently—France, the light and frivolous nation of our tradition—so that one so little prone to toleration of the foreigner as Kipling wishes to kneel before her soldiers. England, the judicial, has set a bad example of quarrelling under fire, yet with the practical gift for adjustment and coalition that has never failed her in history. Ireland has shown herself heartily loyal and chivalrous, far more so than sullen, self-seeking Wales, while Scotland has fought as her sons love to fight. Austria is manifesting unexpected staying power, while the pugnacious Balkan States have for once fallen in love with peace. Italy, whom we blamed at first for playing politics, has done some of the most brilliant fighting of the war. There remains Germany. Here the revelation has been pitiless. The names of Belgium and the *Lusitania* are burnt into history; and nothing, it should be added, could make a worse impression than the present propaganda concerning Belgium’s “guilt.”

Russia we have thought of as a tragical nation; her music, her poetry, her novels, full of complaining, even her ballads sung in a minor key. And in conformity, perhaps, with this tradition of distress, Russia, after a period of advance, has suffered a series of reverses, made more difficult to bear by the noisy jubilation of her enemies, and, even more, by the lugubrious sympathizing of some of her friends. Yet in these adverse days, Russia herself is not lugubrious; on the contrary, she is blithe and confident. She is waking to the

sense, not of her reverses, but of her latent power, and never before has she been so formidable, so resourceful, so full of poise. I have gathered notes of the feeling in Russia during this period of reverse, from many sources quite independent of each other. They all breathe the same spirit and tell the same tale. Russia is beginning, not ending, her effort for victory.

To begin with, there is through all Russia, a courageous facing of the facts. But there has been more than this: there has been the ability to see these facts in their true proportion; not through mists of gloom, as one might expect from the Russian temperament, but in that naked and open daylight which Bacon praised. I can best illustrate this clarity of Russian thought, this virile facing of realities, by reproducing the Russian accounts of some of the major reverses, like the loss of Lvoff (Lemberg) and the evacuation of Warsaw, following the sequence of events from about the beginning of June.

The fall of Przemyśl on June 3, says an able Russian critic of the war, by no means marked the conclusion of the whole Galician operation, but only served as a stage in its further development. The German-Austrian advance did not end when it gained the line of the San and the Dniester. They continued their forward movement with Lemberg as their immediate objective, but with the same purpose as inspired the Austrians in August, 1914, and on exactly the same lines. But this advance was not carried out immediately after the taking of Przemyśl. The period from June 3 to June 12 formed, to a certain extent, a pause between two decisive movements of the Austro-German advance. After winning Przemyśl, the enemy began a re-grouping of his forces. This re-grouping was largely in Mackensen's army, which had played the dominant part in forcing the San and taking Przemyśl. Now this army, and likewise the Austro-German armies of Boroevics and Böhm-Ermolli, divided before Przemyśl, were drawn out in a single line; but this disposition did not last long, and gradually the army of Böhm-Ermolli occupied the line on which the army of Mackensen had previously been extended; the latter then moved to the north, and took up a position facing northeast.

Direct attacks in the direction of Lemberg were made from June 5 to June 10 at Mostsiski, chiefly by the forces of Böhm-Ermolli's army. These attacks, in spite of their

energy and obstinacy, remained without result, and it was evidently not on them that the enemy placed his chief reliance. As in the preceding stages of the development of the Galician operations, the chief blow was delivered by the army of Mackensen, so now to this army was entrusted the task of making the decisive advance. This army began its advance considerably later than the army of Böhm-Ermolli, namely, on June 12. Its blows were directed toward the northeast, to the line of the river Lubachevka and the town of Lubacheff. The battle waged here from June 12 to June 15 ended with the withdrawal of the Russian army operating on that front, on June 15, to the line of the river Taneff, and at the same time the Russians before Lemberg, on the Mostsiski position, withdrew to a position on the Gorodski lakes—that is, to the last, but at the same time the strongest, defensive line on the direct road to Lemberg. After this, when their adversaries succeeded in pressing them back on the line of the Taneff and the Gorodski lakes, they made no pause at all before entering on new operations and the further development of their advance. This advance was continued very energetically toward the northeast, on the towns of Tseshanuff, occupied by the Germans on June 16, and Rawa Ruska. Simultaneously with this, the enemy's attacks progressed on the line of the Gorodski lakes. Details of the battles carried on along this front have not, up to the present, been published, but evidently on the Gorodski line the enemy was not able to gain any very noteworthy successes. More successful were his activities toward the northeast, in the direction of Rawa Ruska, which led to the evacuation of the Russian positions in these towns. Evidently this German success was the chief cause of the Russians leaving the position on the Gorodski lakes, on June 20.

With their withdrawal from this position, the fate of Lemberg was decided, since between the Gorodski lakes and Lemberg itself there was no defensive line on which it would be possible to hold the enemy with any greater chance of success than before. None the less, the Russian armies did not leave without fighting; and on June 21 and the following night were fought obstinate rear-guard actions, in which the enemy was not able to force the Russian armies out. The taking of Lemberg by the Austrian and German armies marked a period of halt in the course of the Galician campaign. The immediate problem which the enemy had set

himself—to drive the Russian armies out of Galicia—was almost accomplished, since those parts of Galicia which have hitherto remained in Russian hands have no great significance either for us or for our enemies. Immediately after this success, the Austro-Germans undertook another operation, of a more serious character—an advance into Russian territory. As in August, 1914, this advance, moving in a north-easterly direction, towards Kholm, and later towards Brest-Litovsk, was for the purpose of securing the whole kingdom of Poland and the line of the Vistula, throughout its entire length. Successes of the Austro-Germans in this direction would sooner or later compel the Russians, for purely mechanical reasons, to evacuate the whole of Poland, and to retire on the Brest-Litovsk line. This is the aim which the Teutonic Allies set themselves in August, 1914, and they have the same purpose now.

Thus the only Galician territory remaining in Russian hands was the lower course of the Dniester below Halicz. This region had not remained inactive. Here also battles were fought, of a serious, obstinate character, and here also the Germans and Austrians repeatedly undertook efforts to cross to the left bank of the Dniester. Important efforts were launched on June 15, when the enemy forces succeeded in gaining the left bank of the Dniester in three deep curves; but all their efforts to advance from these, and to occupy the northern bank of the river on a more extended front, remained unsuccessful. Beginning with June 15, and continuing till June 21, obstinate battles were fought, with notable successes for Russia. Not only was the enemy not permitted to leave the bends of the river occupied by him, but he was driven into their recesses, and at the same time many prisoners were taken. During the last three days of this battle alone, from June 19 to June 21, the Russians took more than 6,000 prisoners. Their army, holding the line of the Gnila Lipa, was also furiously attacked, beginning with June 28. In the course of several days, the enemy, suffering enormous losses at this point, succeeded in establishing himself on the left bank of the Gnila Lipa, and this was bound to have an effect on the regions of the Dniester further to the south-east. "In general," says the writer, "the whole of the fighting on the Dniester, which lasted more than a month, went well for us. We inflicted serious blows on our enemy and took from 80,000 to 90,000 prisoners on the Dniester

front. The armies of Generals Linsingen and Pflanze^r operating on this front, were continuously reinforced, yet, in spite of these reinforcements, their armies are at present not only no stronger than at the beginning, but are actually weaker. Our official sources fix the losses of General Linsingen's army alone, operating on a front of 60 versts [40 miles] at from 120,000 to 150,000 men in a month. As the total number of this army was not much more than this, it follows that, in the course of a month, it was entirely renewed."

This was written, of course, while Warsaw was still in Russian hands, although this clear-eyed observer frankly forecast its loss. Let us take up the parable again a month or more later, on August 10, following, this time, the account of another writer.

Five days have already passed, he begins, and the fall of Warsaw, after which the end of the war was promised to the Germans, has not changed the general strategical position at all. Even further withdrawal from Warsaw and the line of the middle Vistula, if this should become inevitable in the immediate future, will be dictated not so much by the German occupation of Warsaw as by the appearance of considerable new German forces on the Narew front, between Lomza and Rojan. When the reinforcement of Generals Scholz and Gallwitz, at the expense of the armies on the western front, began to threaten the right flank of the Warsaw group of armies, then, evidently, measures for our withdrawal from the line of the middle Vistula were taken. This movement was also closely bound up with the gathering of the harvest, which had not only to be reaped, but also conveyed to the rear. Now, when all this has been accomplished, and the tactical problem of our Warsaw group of armies—to prevent Prince Leopold's carrying the bridges—is ended, then the longer presence of these armies in Warsaw must, in a strategical sense, be counted purposeless. The approach of superior German forces in the region of Ostrov was likewise a cause of our withdrawal for a distance of nearly 70 versts (46 miles). The almost unopposed withdrawal of our Warsaw armies from the line of the middle Vistula was guaranteed by the enormous losses which we inflicted on the armies of Generals Scholz and Gallwitz in the Narew battles. Only a shadow of them remained; all that was best of them found a final resting place on our defensive

line on the river Narew and its approaches. This loss, of course, the Germans will immediately make good, but, while this is being done, our Warsaw armies will have time to retire to the east. This will delay the junction of the northern German armies of Scholz and Gallwitz with the southern armies of Joseph-Ferdinand and Mackensen. In a strategical sense, Riga is necessary to the Germans. Drawn on by our retreat from the Shavli region and by reports of the evacuation of Riga, the Germans persuaded themselves that they could take Riga with their bare hands. With this aim, they planned to attack Riga simultaneously by land and sea. Their fleet, after destroying the mine-fields, was to have entered the Gulf of Riga; and the left wing of Bülow's army, one and a half to two army corps in strength, was to have attacked Riga from the direction of the river Missa, while a strong offensive was also made from the direction of Schönberg. But Germany's land army was completely defeated on August 4. The German fleet, carrying out the difficult task of mine-sweeping in the Gulf of Riga, may have been ignorant of the defeat of Bülow's army before Riga, so that, in the final result, the two attacks failed to co-ordinate. The attack by sea at the mouth of the Gulf of Riga was as unsuccessful as the land attack, since the German fleet of nine battleships, twelve cruisers, and a great number of torpedo boats lost one cruiser and two torpedo boats without accomplishing anything. On the same day, August 8, a strong German advance-guard at Schönberg suffered defeat, being driven from several villages and thrown back with heavy losses, and on the night of August 8 a desperate attack on Kovno was repulsed with very large German losses. These important events on the front between the Dwina and the Niemen quite distinctly show that the Germans are seeking to gain spectacular successes near, or on the direct road to, our capital, Petrograd, for the sake of the effect on the Balkan States. But the wide extent of this new field of operations, its strategical character, and the liberation of a notable part of our armies, set free from the Warsaw front, with a marked shortening of our line—all this permits us to view the new German operations with equanimity.

On the date when the foregoing was printed, August 10, *Novoe Vremya* contained this note: "Every day through Riga pass parties of German prisoners, captured in the Mitau region. The majority of them are boys of 17

or 18, frightfully weary, and in rags. Most of them are barefoot."

We glean from these accounts not so much the Russian view of the events of the great retreat, as the spirit in which Russia views these events. Let us glance, now, at a summary of the lessons of the first year of the war, from the Russian point of view:

The most careful study of both battle-fronts in the east and west, says the writer whom I am paraphrasing, and the unanimous declarations of authoritative participants in the war, lead to the conclusion that the Teutonic armies, though very strong, have nevertheless not produced the results expected of them. For the Austrian armies, before the war, complete destruction was prophesied, in case of conflict with Russia. This forecast has been realized: at the present time, the Austrian army, as an independent whole, has ceased to exist. Before the war, we counted the German army a very serious enemy, but not invincible. This has also been confirmed. Soldiers and officers, lieutenants and Field Marshals, have shown themselves in action just what we knew them to be before the war began. Their military art poured itself into moulds well known to us. We saw their ideas and future operations in the war-games at Berlin and their garrisons, in the major and minor manœuvres. All this is not new. Our art and knowledge have not yielded place to the German, and have outstripped those diligent pupils of the German school—the Austrians. Our soldier has shown himself the superior even of the German soldier. In spite of the fact that to the generally well-educated German soldier have been opposed so many representatives of our backwoods bear's dens, who have learned only in the barrack schools, and many of whom have not even finished the course there, every one of our soldiers has shown himself a conscious warrior, strong in soul and body, splendidly comprehending his work and independently fulfilling it. While, in attacking even weakly defended positions, German generals have had to send their soldiers forward in dense masses, and by this means artificially endow them with courage and tenacity, our Russian soldiers, though often greatly outnumbered, go forward on their own initiative to certain death, because they understand the necessity of self-sacrifice, and, of their own wills, strain towards it.

In order to make their chances of victory equal to ours,

the Germans adopted the principle of securing an enormous superiority of forces, and organized all their advances in such a way that at the moment of attack they have always greatly surpassed us in numbers. To be always stronger than one's adversary—this is an art, and we cannot deny to our opponent the credit of having mastered it. But the whole experience of the war has shown that, thanks to the superiority of our soldiers over the German soldiers, and, even more, over the Austrian soldiers, a superiority in force, even when considerable, did not make victory certain, but that still another factor was necessary. That this factor also would be present on the battlefield was also well known, for the principles of "fire tactics," that is, giving the chief and decisive rôle, not to the soldiers, but to weapons and munitions, was set forth in the German literature of military science. And so the Germans acted in the battles of this war. One thing alone exceeded all expectation and conjecture: this was the quantity of the weapons and munitions which the Germans brought into action. Such a concentration of artillery fire as we see in the present battles no one foretold or foresaw. And in this, up to the present, our adversary has gained an undoubted success, for no human heroism could stand against this preternatural, more than marvellous, water-spout of fire and steel. It swept aside everything in its course; it opened the way for the German soldiers in every case where the German army was successful.

So far, our Russian writers.

But Russia has no intention of letting Germany keep the upper hand in this matter of weapons and munitions. Already from three directions new supplies are pouring into her battle-fronts: from the north, the port of Archangelsk, which will very soon be supplemented by a new ice-free port on the Lapland coast, kept open all the year by the warm current of the Gulf Stream which bends round the north of Norway, and in process of being joined by railroad to central Russia; from her Pacific ports, whence a continuous supply—interrupted at a critical moment for Russia by the threat of trouble in China—is once again pouring along the Trans-Siberian railroad, a supply steadily increasing in volume, under the stimulus of Russia's former rival and present ally on the Pacific; and from the third source, the machine-shops and factories of Russia herself, which are being pressed to the utmost possible output by the very remarkable move-

ment which is popularly called "the mobilization of the Russian nation." Whether yet a fourth source will shortly be added, coming through the gates of the Dardanelles, is a secret which lies in the lap of the gods.

Students of English Constitutional history remember that the whole practical power of the House of Commons—the model of all representative bodies throughout the world—was developed through one thing: the right to vote supplies to the Crown, which entailed the right to withhold supplies. This was the Archimedes lever of modern Democracy. There is evidence that the present war, and particularly the present reverses of the Russian army, may play something the same rôle for the Duma; for that body, whose name suggests deliberative rather than executive power, is in process of gaining a real grasp on the government of the nation. Should this development really take place, this will be among the greatest and most vital results of the war, because it will mean so much for the moral growth of that great nation in whose hands rests, inevitably, the golden key of the future.

A concluding word: Such is the retreat, as Russians see it. How, in their hearts, do the really wise and far-sighted men in Germany see it? What face does it bear to them, with the early Winter already upon them, the first frosts announcing the time, close at hand, when iron ground will make the digging of trenches well-nigh impossible, when snow-drifts will pile mountainous obstacles in the way of their daily supply of munitions and food? They know, too, that Russia's supply of men is well-nigh inexhaustible, while they themselves are near the bottom of the purse. Do they foresee already, with startling clarity, that their army of invasion has come to stay? —that the world-war, as they prophesied, is really being decided on the eastern front, though not in the sense of their prophesies? If there be men in Germany with genuine foresight and wisdom, I think they regard the retreat of Russia's armies with a dismay akin to terror.

CHARLES JOHNSTON.